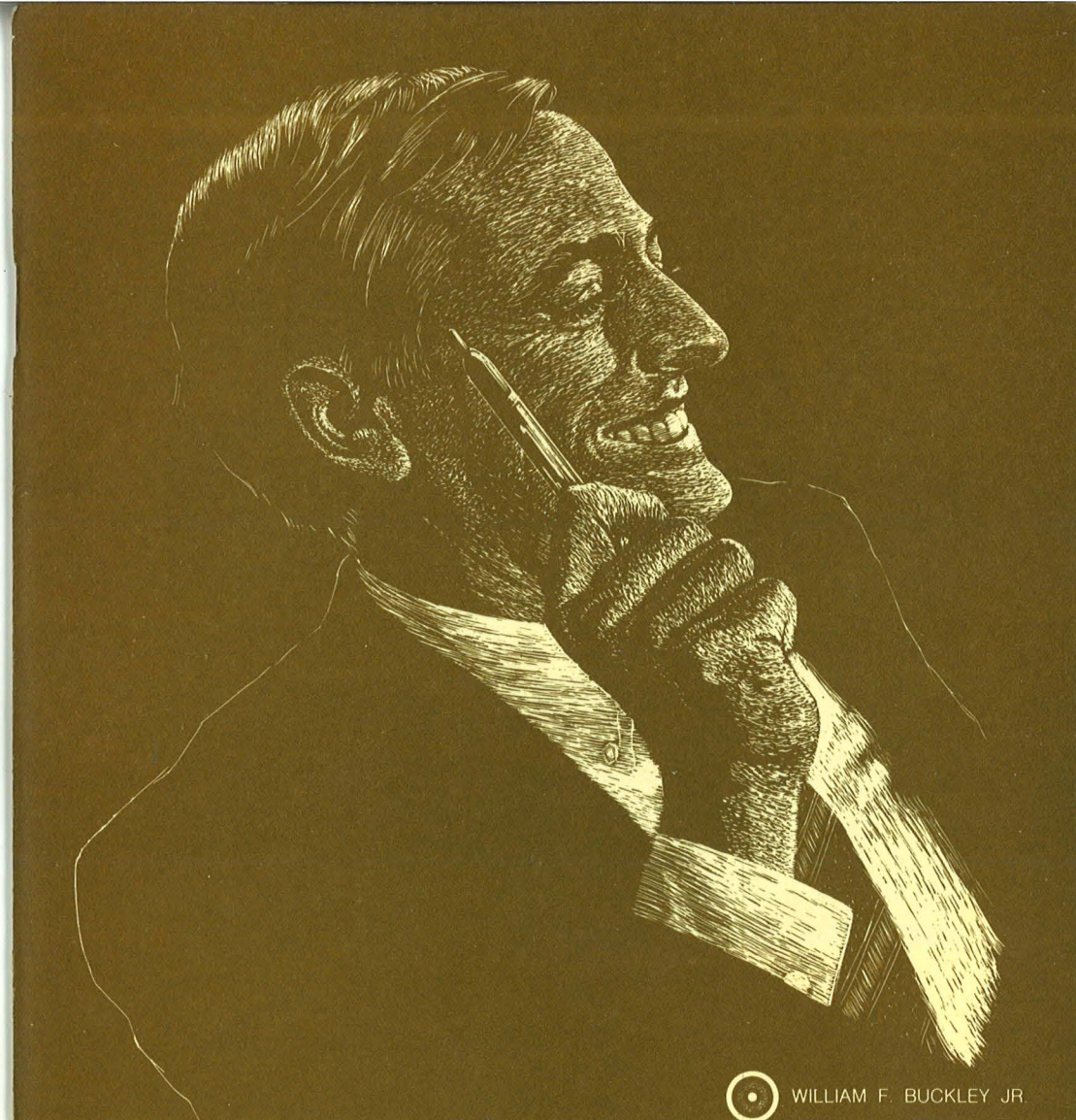


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WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY JR.

FIRING LINE

GUEST: ALLAN BLOOM

SUBJECT: "HIGHER EDUCATION HAS FAILED DEMOCRACY"

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SOUTHERN EDUCATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS ASSOCIATION

SECA PRESENTS

FIRING Line



HOST: WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY JR.

GUEST: ALLAN BLOOM

EXAMINER: MIDGE DECTER

SUBJECT: "HIGHER EDUCATION HAS FAILED
DEMOCRACY"

FIRING LINE is produced and directed by WARREN STEIBEL
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SOUTHERN EDUCATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS ASSOCIATION

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MR. BUCKLEY: Allan Bloom has written what is probably the most provocative book of the decade, and its special appeal derives precisely from the bizarre fact that it should be provocative to support philosophical declarations once thought to be axiomatic in a liberal society based on natural rights, to reaffirm the need for excellence, and to reaffirm the educational need to identify and, however circumspectly, to revere our intellectual patrimony. This is not now happening in the top colleges in America--Professor Bloom insists he knows only about them, but they are correctly thought of as the intellectual ganglia of the entire republic. The subtitle of his book is "How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students." The title of the book is, The Closing of the American Mind.

Allan Bloom was born in Indianapolis and took his bachelor's degree, as also his PhD, from the University of Chicago. He has taught at Yale and Cornell--which figures dramatically in the narrative--at the universities of Toronto, Tel Aviv and Paris. But he is continually affiliated with the University of Chicago, where he is a professor in the Committee on Social Thought. He has written, with Harry Jaffa, a book on Shakespeare's politics and has translated and edited Plato's Republic and Rousseau's Emile, among other works.

Our examiner today is Midge Decter, the writer, editor and executive director of the Committee for a Free World. More about Miss Decter in due course.

Mr. Bloom's theses are comprehensive in scope, and we will get a good feel of some of them. But it would be interesting, I think, to begin with a few particulars, and most challenging would be to tax him to explain four positions he takes which were singled out by one reviewer as damaging to his general credibility. The first of these is a statement in his book that "Good black students are victims," in his words, "of a stereotype, but one that has been chosen by black leadership." Could you explain what you mean by that?

MR. BLOOM: Yes. In a way the most delicate of the topics in the book because it's the one most connected with our highest aspirations and our justice, our sense of justice, that the-- Perhaps I should go back a step and say that this is part of the book dedicated to the character of students today, where I discuss this issue and make the remark. And of course, if anybody knows the last 25 years, if students have changed, one has been--one important role--has been the question of race. And the great expectations one had in 1962, '63, '64, that once all the barriers fell that we would be together. And of course one had rarely good black students prior to that time because there were very few in the universities, but that somehow that this would simply be transformed. But at the very moment the barriers fell, special standards of admissions were set for blacks which had the effect of saying, "You don't have to be as good a student." I mean, however one glossed that over, it was that standards were indeed going to be different and therefore

if it had worked it would have been fine. But of course it never does. In general, if you have lower SAT scores, you don't perform as well in college, and that's the way it turned out. Without any affirmation of the goodness of SAT tests, that is indeed the way it works.

MR. BUCKLEY: Well, you go on elsewhere to say, and I think this is extremely interesting, that the philosophical sustenance given to equality and to the neglect of race as a factor other than entirely accidental is really sustained by instruments--the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution--which we now tend not only to neglect or to misunderstand, but to derogate as in some way--

MR. BLOOM: Yes.

MR. BUCKLEY: --impregnated with bourgeois preoccupations.

MR. BLOOM: If I could link this with--

MR. BUCKLEY: That's what I want you to do.

MR. BLOOM: I was perhaps a little too long winded in my beginning. --and simply say that what I meant by that phrase, which you quote from Time magazine, was--I think everybody agrees, one side or the other--that the black students are victims of a kind of stereotype, that they are there under special circumstances. Good black students suffer from that because they have achieved and don't want their achievements denigrated, those who are not doing as well feel very uncomfortable. And it's a very sad situation for them. And they don't-- Their special situation sets them aside. And the reason why I say it's chosen by black leadership, all those, insofar as university goes, all those black leaders who are strongly in favor of special standards of admission, continue, or support, the existence of that stereotype. Therefore the expectation is the student will not be as well.

MR. BUCKLEY: As you say it, it is so persuasive that one asks then the question, why should your saying it be so patently misunderstood?

MR. BLOOM: Well, the atmosphere around discussions of race has been, in these last 20 years, a highly charged one, as you know. It's both very insistent demands and-- Of course, our best principles support much of those demands. And as one knows also, it is unclear how you handle such demands. And that was really in the context, the remark that you quote, of talking about the universities, particularly obviously the white professors and white administrators who were so very eager to bring in a lot of black students just so they could say they had them, without thinking of how they would be prepared, how they would do, and of course that led to what I think is a disaster, a very high degree of separatism, blacks and whites not being together in the universities. And the universities--the American universities; this goes back to your

second remark--were founded on a kind of democratic universalism, the access of all reasonable human beings, their essential unity. And some individuals thought that it was necessary--more than individuals, groups--that it was necessary to denigrate the universities, and that the founding principles which the universities in some sense embody in order to do away with racial injustice.

MR. BUCKLEY: Okay. Well, that leads me very directly to the second of the four criticisms of your fallible credibility--namely, "Slavery was laid to rest by the Declaration and the Constitution." Somebody found this an affront presumably because we had a Constitution that among other things guaranteed no interference with slavery until 1808.

MR. BLOOM: Yes, of course that very statement about 1808 that it was going to be abolished, it was an agreement that there were going to be no more slaves brought to the United States. There was no mention of slavery in the Constitution, and I am sure that the Constitution reflects the Declaration of Independence and its principles--

MR. BUCKLEY: But there was a constituent point, wasn't there, that a black man would count for only a fraction--

MR. BLOOM: But that is-- You know, I'm not a Constitutional scholar, but it doesn't say a black man, but you know, all those who are not citizens--I don't have the quote--but would count for three fifths. But it was precisely the North that insisted on that. The South wanted them to count as one full man because they could use their votes. So that was clearly a compromise, but a compromise that was forced on the South by members of the constituent assembly, members of the Constitutional Convention, who refused to give the South, the slave powers, that vote. And the reason, what I would argue throughout, that I say it is laid to rest in principle. There is no American principle other than equality--or equality and freedom. Without that, there is no principle of justice in the United States, and the--

MR. BUCKLEY: So the exception was just temporizing.

MR. BLOOM: American history is a working-- Of course there is a kind of compromise that goes on. The issue is: Did you want to have a union. If there was no union there would still be slavery in the South, and that would be a kind of self-indulgent, excessive moral purity to say rather than make a compromise with slavery in hopes that the union would put it to rest, one would like to have clean hands and not get involved with the politics which would do away with slavery.

MR. BUCKLEY: So your point really is then that the basic American affirmations in the Declaration and the Constitution were really instruments of manumission, however delayed.

MR. BLOOM: They are principles, and I say it was decided in

principles, and principles to work out in practice frequently require many lives. But there was no viable principle of justice which would have said we have a right to slavery. There was none of that kind or that part of Aristotelianism which caught American souls. Those who were for slavery really had to do it for naked self-interest under the guise of very flimsy ideologies. So our history, our whole history, is a gradual overcoming, with terrible incidents.

MR. BUCKLEY: Well, then, tell us why it is that an acknowledgment of these liberating instruments isn't more universally a) inculcated, and b) appreciated.

MR. BLOOM: Well, of course, that has been one of the major problems of the university and the kind of relativism I have spoken of. Since I was in the university, since I began in 1946, the universities were instruments of egalitarianism. It was there that the civil rights movement was generated. Everybody I knew affirmed those American principles and worked for them. And then suddenly, when the movement came to its head, it said that the universities were corrupt instruments of the old accommodations. So the very source, the place where the principles were held, and knowingly held in a scholarly way, where people could affirm them, not only with their passion, but with their reason, was discredited. And this notion that it was American institutions, particularly the university, that stood in the way of this righting of all wrongs, the integration, or rather the application of the principles of justice to the black population, the idea that the university was not one of the prime movers, because it had those principles and because it taught them, was absurd. So at the moment that the universities in a way had their greatest practical political success, they lost their good repute and they lost the habit of reaffirming those principles.

MR. BUCKLEY: Well, you use words so precisely that you make me wince a little bit when you say that they were instruments of egalitarianism. They were rather instruments, were they not, of upward mobility?

MR. BLOOM: Well, that's a kind of sociological understanding. What I--

MR. BUCKLEY: Well, egalitarianism implies pushing a certain Procrusteanism, doesn't it? You sometimes push people down, as for instance the progressive income tax has pushed some people down.

MR. BLOOM: Well, when I said egalitarianism--and perhaps I shouldn't say it--I do think that both the American principles which were largely held were principles of equality: All men are created equal. But in the second place, there is something profoundly egalitarian about philosophy from its beginning. That's Nietzsche's criticism of Socrates. Who was Socrates? Nobody. Old, ugly, poor, from no family. But all then are equal at least in their potential capacity to know. And that

was really the only principle in the world that went beyond those questions of nation, class, race, and it remains the only one.

MR. BUCKLEY: Well, the Socratic notion, it seems to me, was redefined by Aquinas rather intelligently by saying that everyone had a capacity to know to the extent that it was necessary to know to save his immortal soul.

MR. BLOOM: Yes.

MR. BUCKLEY: Now, whether or not you can instruct an illiterate slave in the principle of the hypotenuse of a triangle is an entirely different question from how he ought to be treated.

MR. BLOOM: Well, you see, this is a problem. The word "equality" is ambiguous, and of course not everybody is an egalitarian. But what is the relationship of our Founding Fathers' egalitarianism and that of Socrates is complicated. In some sense they have nothing to do with one another. But still, the character of reason-- I mean, our Founding Fathers-- Equal rights-- And different perhaps from a fundamental respect equal. And factually equal. Whether Socrates believed that is unclear, but at least for Socrates-- And certainly for Socrates, the-- For example, a racial distinction or a class distinction--

MR. BUCKLEY: Would have been preposterous.

MR. BLOOM: Would have no bearing.

MR. BUCKLEY: Yes. Yes.

MR. BLOOM: And that's what I meant by saying that the universities are repositories of the rational tradition of egalitarianism and of the American traditions, or at least they were, of egalitarianism, which creates a certain tension, obviously. And clearly, what's happened in the universities is the application of a radical egalitarianism, which Socrates would have disapproved of, and the Founding Fathers disapproved of, and that is that there are not superior talents which need to be cultivated--

MR. BUCKLEY: And should be acknowledged.

MR. BLOOM: Well, in order to be cultivated, to have institutions supporting them in the kind of respect--

MR. BUCKLEY: Sure.

MR. BLOOM: --obviously they would have to be acknowledged.

MR. BUCKLEY: Yes, right, right, right. Well, now, let's finish with that particular list. You were criticized for saying that the women's movement is not founded on nature.

Explain what you mean by that.

MR. BLOOM: Yes. By the way, I should have looked over this list before coming, because I looked up a couple and they were put together from a couple of sentences. At least one of them was. But in this particular one, I remember precisely what I was talking about, which is rare enough for the things I write. [laughter] I said America is proud of two things: love of nature and love of conquest of nature. And the women's movement, in large measure, has to come under the category of conquest of nature. The pill, the medicines which keep children alive perhaps so that you can reproduce with two or three children, or two or three pregnancies and not eight or 10, that women live longer, there have been labor saving devices. I mean, all of those are aspects of modernity. So it wasn't to say the women's movement is unnatural. There was a second element to that also. It was in a passage in the book. - It's very easy for an author to say, "Oh, I was quoted out of context," and then rebuild the context, but of course these are just sentences, and it was a passage in which I talked about sexual liberation and the women's movement together. And sexual liberation was clearly a naturalistic movement: Let go. And to the extent that it applied to the greatest part of the population, it meant that there was much more differentiation between men and women. If there is going to be free, liberated sex, then men and women were going to be men and women in their activities more than they used to be. And there was a clear, natural desire underlying it.

MR. BUCKLEY: There was sort of a particularization involved in that?

MR. BLOOM: Well, all I mean to say is if you're going to be making love all the time--

MR. BUCKLEY: You're going to have to have two sexes.

MR. BLOOM: Yes, you have two sexes. I mean, it's not when you're being copilot, you know. The sexual difference doesn't make a difference, the sexual distinction doesn't make a difference. And connected with it also was a very clear positive feeling, erotic desire. Whereas equality for women is based upon an argument for justice. And arguments for justice may appeal to our reason, may appeal to our anger, but very rarely to the natural desires. There is not an erotic desire for justice. And I was developing that theme, that sexual liberation really allowed people to let go, whereas feminism required a lot of laws and a lot of restructuring of souls and attitudes and discovering, you know, new capacities requiring education. It requires much more-- It's much more of a project. Sexual liberation was not a project at all: Just go ahead and do what you feel like doing.

MR. BUCKLEY: As I understand the points that you made in the book, it's not only a project, it is a project that is bound not to succeed because it is against nature.

MR. BLOOM: Well, of course I never formulated it in that way. I tried to state it as carefully as possible. I mean, there is an argument--I do not believe it to be true--that in Western civilization there is male machismo, which is educated, and that if released there would be more caring, more nurturing males. I think in our current atmosphere--and of course, that obviously is a linchpin of a possibility of a new nuclear constructed family, where the distinction between male and females wouldn't be important--the males have these qualities. And I think in a liberal society, where people can do pretty much what they want, you can't--or are very unlikely, or almost I would say can't--count upon a very great proportion of males becoming nurturing. And that seems to me to be a very fundamental need for a certain kind of feminist argument, at least if the family is to stay together. But I wouldn't simply say it's unnatural. I tried to state these things carefully.

MR. BUCKLEY: Yes.

MR. BLOOM: I'm more trying to raise the problem theoretically, because the relation of men and women is a complicated thing, it has a long history, and I don't want the whole-- I have two things. I don't want to give the easy answers myself, but more important, I don't want that whole history wiped out--

MR. BUCKLEY: Right.

MR. BLOOM: --which is in philosophy and particularly in literature, so that one can reconsider what you lose and what you gain.

MR. BUCKLEY: But you are also engaged in revitalizing certain theses which have in some societies been axiomatic and have here and there been fashionable, but whose durability you insist on. You have one or two striking sentences in which you almost melodramatically tease people by these unorthodox formulations. You write somewhere, "I found myself responding to the professor of psychology that I personally try to teach my students prejudices." Now, I don't think anybody since Burke has used "prejudices" in quite that way, but would you tell us what you mean by that?

MR. BLOOM: Yes. I wasn't thinking of Burke. I mean, I don't steal from high models. [laughter] I repeat them consciously. But I do recognize the connection. He thought he was being interesting and different in repeating--this was 25 years ago--the cliché of everyone: You shouldn't be ethnocentric, you shouldn't think your way is the best way. And that had been going on already for 30 or 40 years. He was a man, oh, at least two hours behind his time. [laughter] And the notion--I already had the sense that our issue--we didn't have anything we cared about to criticize. There was very little prejudice. Or there was prejudice--if there was a prejudice, it was a prejudice that we were unprejudiced. And to know what caring about certain things meant and what itself overcoming it was. And also I have a fundamental belief that one only first sees

the world by having strong opinions about it. Those opinions may need refinement, but if one has no opinions to begin with--

MR. BUCKLEY: Yes. I think as [unintelligible] said, unless you're prejudiced, you can't be tolerant.

MR. BLOOM: You--

MR. BUCKLEY: But what is there to be tolerant of that causes the exhibition of that particular virtue if you don't believe something with which that disagrees?

MR. BLOOM: Well, of course, some people are beyond tolerance. I don't mean beyond tolerance in that they are intolerable, but--[laughter]

MR. BUCKLEY: Well, there are those, too. [laughter]

MR. BLOOM: Yes. But who don't think that the tolerance implies a certain tolerance-- Anyway, George Washington said-- You know, in a way the day we talk about tolerance in relations between Christians and Jews is past and we talk about equality. And it wasn't so much that that I was insisting on. It was really a kind of lived reformulation of the Socratic teaching, that you have to begin with opinions to examine them. Plato says we are all born in caves--

MR. BUCKLEY: You've got to postulate something.

MR. BLOOM: And those caves-- You know, what constitutes a cave is strong prejudices. But without those strong prejudices, you would have no interpretation of the world which would give you a picture of the world, and then that critical faculty or whatever arises wouldn't have anything to work on. I mean, a kind of indifference, a kind of gray sameness. They're all values, yes.

MR. BUCKLEY: You encourage, as I understand it from your book, or is encouraged, a kind of amorphous values which are so sort of far out that they are almost impossible to realize, therefore giving you a kind of a platonic satisfaction to which you are entitled. You have a sentence here, "The imperative to promote equality, stamp out racism, sexism and elitism, the peculiar crimes of democratic society, as well as war, is overriding for a man who can define no other interest worth defending." Now, is there a point at which your attachment to ideals, because they become so abstract, relieves you of practical idealism?

MR. BLOOM: Well, that's a kind of easy morality here which is part of our times. It kind of feels good without having to do very much in daily life, to be against all the worst things. For instance, I was against the war in Vietnam, against racism and so on, which, of course, requires no effort to say those things and one is okay to carry on one's tawdry little life. But what I meant here, and what I was concentrating on, is that

for a university, the overriding issue has to be clarity and no other passion. The passion for knowing and understanding. And it's not that I think that these particular goals are in themselves contemptible--

MR. BUCKLEY: No, no, obviously not.

MR. BLOOM: --but they need questioning. I mean, the elitism one is the easiest to address. I mean, where did we get that term, "elitism"? Was it sociology and bad religious history, and does that describe an American school where they let in students on the basis of examinations? Or take the Ecole Normale Supérieure in France, where anybody from the colonies, just by studying, could get in and receive the very special education which kept the whole educational system going in France at a very high level for a hundred years. Is it sensible to call that elitism? And ask yourself where did "elitism" come from? And a real study of equality. See, our students begin, of course, obviously with knowing equality is good. And therefore the tendency is immediately, when everyone hears that word, to go in that direction. And what we need is philosophical reflection, study, some sensibility about what equality is and whether it does not have its risks and so on. And it's more-- It's not so much that the passions that stamp out anything else, it's the monochrome character, the lack of alternatives, the absolute certitude that people who claim that there are no absolutes have that strikes me in this particular passage.

MR. BUCKLEY: And these absolutes, I've always thought, are really postulated by the doctrine of academic freedom properly understood. Academic freedom, as I understand it, really, is a license to pursue the truth. But if truth is posited as nonexistent, then you are pursuing a chimera.

MR. BLOOM: Well, that's the--

MR. BUCKLEY: On the other hand, if it is existent, you are then committed, are you not, to deny its opposite. So there is no point in saying that you are intolerant or to deny the opposite of truth if the whole purpose of academic freedom is to encourage you to search out the truth.

MR. BLOOM: You see-- I mean, I couldn't-- I mean, that in a way summarizes the argument. There was a kind of nice, liberal--I mean liberal in the best sense--acceptance of this relativism "There is no truth" assuming that therefore nobody would assert in Hitlerian or Stalinian fashion their truth. But of course at the same time, people who seem to be unaware of that undermine the arguments, the absolutes that you have to behave in certain decent ways in society. Those are just opinions, values, like any others. That's surely the case. I wanted to insist, though, that the book recognizes that there is something problematic about academic freedom. And it's problematic because academic freedom assumes a positive relation between the good of society and the freedom of the

academy, and if there were real tension, then of course we would call that into question. Now there is no doubt of calling academic freedom into question--put a question mark after it--there is no doubt that modern thought, and perhaps all thought, but certainly modern thought, wonders whether the unbridled pursuit of the truth is good for communities that have beliefs, that the academic freedom came into being in a very optimistic moment of real parallelism between political--or belief in parallelism--between political and intellectual progress. Now, what one must do if one is to revitalize economic freedom is not in a tired way just repeat the formulas, but go back to rethink that parallelism. Because they found themselves absolutely unarmed when students said the thing that counts is commitment. Because this-- In the free academies people had been teaching that commitment is the source of serious living, and not knowing. And so there was a deep intellectual problem, one which I don't resolve in my book, but that we have to face.

MR. BUCKLEY: Well, you know, probably as often quoted as anything Jefferson ever wrote is that business on one of those monuments that, "Let dissenters be tolerated as perpetual evidence that freedom will always prevail over error"--he didn't use the word "error." In any event, that really was a high moment of democratic epistemological optimism. He said it doesn't matter--using contemporary symbols--how many communists you have, because there are always going to be more non-communists. But that really was a postulate that history has not in fact accepted. And you mentioned--and I think it was a very striking sentence, which I will now read, that during the furor in Cornell, distinguished by the students who went with rifles and seized a building, "A distinguished professor of political science read to his radical students some speeches about what was to be done. They were extremely enthusiastic until he informed them that those speeches were by Mussolini." So that there is a sense in which much of the academic "elite" showed them that they were very easily bullied by people, by students, who thought that radical action could instantly transcend all of those "prejudices" which should have guarded perspectives.

MR. BLOOM: Well, I quite-- That in a way is the center of the book, that unawares, a kind of thought, which is a very powerful thought--it might even be true--which says there is no objectivity. It is human positing, human making, human passions establishing the ways of life, the styles of lives of human beings--that's what really counts, not reason. And those are the theses which in the first place were defended and defended very powerfully by Nietzsche, but that that became kind of commonplace, without thinking of it, thinking what it really meant in the universities, at the same time saying, "Oh, yes, we are university men; we protect academic freedom." When those two came to a crunch, obviously the decayed, old university tolerance--well, cracked, I think that's--

MR. BUCKLEY: Why? Why?

MR. BLOOM: Partly because they didn't believe. I mean, there are some people who are cowards.

MR. BUCKLEY: Yes.

MR. BLOOM: You know, obviously. I mean, that's always the case. At Cornell it didn't require very much courage. When you went to college you must have heard professors who said, "Oh, those German professors behaved so badly." Well, it would have meant death for them. At Cornell, it might have meant death by some accident, but it was only-- You know, there were guns, but certainly there was a police force, which there wasn't in Germany, or the National Guard, which would have come in to clean up the situation. There wasn't any great risk. But I think deeper than the cowardliness--

MR. BUCKLEY: Was the lack of philosophical foundation.

MR. BLOOM: That's right.

MR. BUCKLEY: Because you had another sentence which struck me: "A few students discovered that pompous teachers who catechized them about academic freedom could with a little shove be made into dancing bears," which indeed some became in Berkeley, in Columbia--

MR. BLOOM: And Cornell. I saw them. I had the pleasure of watching. And the pleasure of Cornell, by the way, was having been aware that this was happening, to see it actually happening and to be able to tell them--because one usually is civil--exactly what one thought of them. [laughter] And since they know somehow they had done wrong, they were easy game.

MR. BUCKLEY: Professor Van Woodward somewhere along the line wrote that nobody has really contemplated the extraordinary failure of the academic class during those years, that the same people who spent their lives writing about the failure of the German intellectual class under the challenge of Hitler themselves failed with, as you pointed out, far fewer objective pressures. Nobody was going to go and really hang the professor Clinton Rossiter, let's say, at Cornell, for taking the temporarily unpopular stand, and yet he actually permitted himself to be pushed. You are very delicate in your book. You don't mention these names. But what is it-- Well, I suppose your book has the best explanation. That they didn't have the fundamental philosophical commitments that served as the convincing scaffolding for their own ostensible thoughts.

MR. BLOOM: Well, they had all been for commitment for value -- That was on one side. And of course with many American scholars it was not why they had accepted it, but that they said, for example the Constitution was a racist document.

MR. BUCKLEY: Yes.

MR. BLOOM: And so if they had been teaching that for all of their lives, and they had become persuaded, then of course their *raison d'être* had disappeared.

MR. BUCKLEY: Yes.

MR. BLOOM: Much of the same had happened with professors of literature who were dealing with books that weren't believable any more, that perhaps had aristocratic foundations and so on, and here they were in the midst of a revolution that demanded relevance and demanded equality and commitment. So you see, commitment is the opposite of the disposition required for a university. It's the suspension of commitment. Now, most people have to have some kind of commitment. And what we've gotten is a society where nobody makes serious commitments any more in universities which spend all their time saying, "We should be making commitments," the exact opposite of the way the thing should be.

MR. BUCKLEY: Yes. Yes. However, I know that you do believe--and I don't want to leave the wrong impression--commitments can be contingent. That is to say, you can commit yourself to a particular obligation, a civic obligation, while leaving your mind open to the possibility that transcendent commitments might--

MR. BLOOM: Well, you see, university life in principle is a very difficult thing, and it is exactly those kinds of problems and no easy resolutions of them. You see, I am most for, you know, what I called easygoing nihilism in the book. That whether we're nihilists or whether we hope for something more, our life has many faultlines, and there is an attempt to present, without really believing in it, a kind of unified, smooth surface to life, and that causes us not to study in the same way. Now, you see, the word "commitment," by the way, is a modern word.

MR. BUCKLEY: Yes.

MR. BLOOM: Aristotle would say something like choice, but it's choice based on deliberation. The word "commitment" means almost certainly for all of us something passionate. This, by the way, goes as much in at least certain kinds of conservative circles--certainly the economist has them--as in the left. That reason cannot deal with ends or values. And when you know that beforehand, then of course your ends or your values have to be mere preferences, which is the easiest way to have them anyhow. You don't have to think about -- in the university.

MR. BUCKLEY: That's right. That's right. Well, let's submit to our examiner. Midge Decter, as I have said, is an author and editor. She has been a student at the University of Minnesota and at the Jewish Theological Seminary. She has served in various capacities at Midstream, Commentary, the Hudson Institute, CBS Legacy Books, Harper's Magazine, Saturday Review and Basic Books. She is the author of several books of

her own and is the executive director of the Committee for a Free World. Miss Decter.

MS. DECTER: Well, I found the discussion between the two of you had one very serious omission. One of the most fascinating things in your book, Allan, is your discussion of the students and the students being a critical issue in universities. And you described students in a condition of being uprooted, cut off, or as you said, Bill, disinherited from their patrimony. And I think that both this discussion and perhaps your book, too, slightly scanted the degree to which we know that the students of the 1960s were not in fact being rebellious but were being obedient, and they were being obedient to a tradition--

MR. BUCKLEY: To the tradition that they inherited.

MS. DECTER: And it was to a tradition that they inherited. In fact, they were submitting to a mandate being imposed upon them, and the degree to which that tradition itself, the anti-bourgeois tradition, if you will, itself was a central tradition in the universities. At Columbia University when there was a great faculty senate deciding, as you describe, about Cornell on some critical issue, perhaps the most distinguished professor of literature in that university stood up and said, "We must remember that these students are our product." Now, perhaps it was cowardice on his part, perhaps it was--

MR. BUCKLEY: This was Lionel Trilling?

MS. DECTER: Yes. --lack of commitment. Partly it was a recognition that he himself and his colleagues had very great responsibility for the ideas and the beliefs of these students. To take their so-called rebellion at face value seems to me a mistake. They were in fact being very submissive to the intellectual mandate that was being offered them. And the students in the '80s whom you describe, who are a different kettle of fish, very different, are in some ways a much sadder phenomenon, because they are the ones who say, "It's no big deal." The most potent sentence quoted about the students in that book is the girl who, when you said, "What do you suppose the mother of someone who--of a young girl who had a lover would have said? How do you feel about it?" and she said, "It's no big deal." And the idea that it's no big deal is also a form of obedience, is it not?

MR. BLOOM: Now you're posing a question. Well, I didn't really at length try to describe the students of the '60s, and there is no doubt that-- I do say in the book, of course, it's part of the university tradition that the problem of the bourgeois dominated European intellectual life and American. You see, of course, being anti-bourgeois in America meant only being to the left, whereas in Europe of course it meant as much being to the right, which kept the debate going. And that was the-- You see now a tremendous amount of anti-bourgeois,

rightist thought, really fascist thought, has become part of the daily fare of the--well, semi-intellectual. If you say the word "bourgeois," as despicable, of course, immediately from the American ear it seems generally to come from the left where as, of course, most of the writers of the 19th century coined it--or not coined it; it was Rousseau who coined it--used it on the right, and certainly Nietzsche, the last man, is certainly a great continuation. Now, as to the question of conformists or nonconformists, I have implied of course there was a huge amount that just came--you know, what was supposed to be instinctive behavior, was simply giving in to public opinion, the relevant of public opinions around them. You see, something that's very striking to me in the reception of the book is--and this I have only become aware of in the last few days--is that in general this long treatment of rock music I give is being treated dismissively. That's clearly The 700 Club, as it was put in one news magazine, prepping for The 700 Club. Even Secretary Bennett is for--likes to reminisce and so on. Now, the person who wrote this article was very anti-TV. Now, what I am impressed by, terribly impressed by--

MR. BUCKLEY: Which article was this?

MR. BLOOM: It was an article--it was a very intelligent review, actually--in Newsweek, but--

MR. BUCKLEY: Oh, yes--

MR. BLOOM: --it didn't take for a moment seriously what I had to say about rock music, and I found this in general. And I think this rock music--I don't condemn it; I don't speak about it moralistically--just as the power. I believe it is much more powerful than television in the formation of young people. But it is such a political power, since young people are so attached to it, that nobody wants to take it on, including the President. You know, why bother? But its very strength--and of course it carries with it--

MR. BUCKLEY: It practically got Jim Watt exiled, didn't it?

MR. BLOOM: Rock music?

MR. BUCKLEY: Yes.

MR. BLOOM: I didn't know about that.

MR. BUCKLEY: He objected to somebody and it turned out to be Nancy's favorite--

MS. DECTER: The Beach Boys.

MR. BLOOM: Yes, well--

MS. DECTER: They're not rock. They're not really rock.

MR. BLOOM: They play a domesticated version of rock music.

But the notion that it can only be a kind of fundamentalism that would say it's perfectly extraordinary that for years somebody like Mick Jagger could be the sole exclusive hero not only of the most ordinary listeners, but university students. Now there are others and there is no single such dominant one--

MR. BUCKLEY: Did that apply in the '60s as Ms. Decter--

MR. BLOOM: No--

MR. BUCKLEY: Well, there were the Beatles.

MR. BLOOM: The music phenomenon began to be very important in the '60s. Began to be very important.

MR. BUCKLEY: Yes, after all, they were ready for Woodstock.

MR. BLOOM: But it contained all of the things. You know, freedom--you know, forming freedom, rebellion, and then also--and it still says this--a universal brotherly love against all these forces which are anti-musical in the world. So of course it obviously carries its ideology as well. But the reason why I insisted upon bringing that in simply is that, you see, I'm not sure that the universities are responsible for all of this. There is--

MR. BUCKLEY: Well, her point is that the parents are responsible, am I correct?

MS. DECTER: Parents and the culture.

MR. BLOOM: I think that the--

MS. DECTER: Including the high culture very much, the high culture.

MR. BLOOM: Of course, my argument is that the high culture is not terribly cultivated now, and because there are no counterpoises, no other institution--no importance of church, no importance of an aristocracy or anything like that--has been incorporated into the system of public opinion, that there really is nothing resisting that. There is an extreme form of egalitarianism is producing that soft tyranny that de Tocqueville talked about, where people just don't have any ideas that take them outside, and also no powerful longings that take them outside. My original title was "Souls without Longing," but the publisher thought nobody would like that. [laughter] But I still am attached to it.

MR. BUCKLEY: It's a wonderful title.

MR. BLOOM: Thank you. Tell that to my publisher. Excuse me, Midge.

MS. DECTER: Well, I want to ask you, Mr. Buckley. I am about to murder one of your most enduring witticisms, because I have

a tin ear. But you said that you would rather be governed by the first thousand names in the Boston telephone book than by the faculty of Harvard University. [laughter] I hope I haven't ruined that.

MR. BUCKLEY: No, it was 2,000. [laughter] You get a better plebiscitary field. [laughter] And the challenge is what?

MS. DECTER: Well, this--

MR. BUCKLEY: How can I have said that?

MS. DECTER: No, this is a sentiment that I find that anyone in his right mind would find it difficult to disagree with.

MR. BUCKLEY: Oh, good. [laughter]

MR. BLOOM: She's not speaking as a Harvard person. [laughter] But, Midge, could I-- I am still in love with the university. You remember that old song? "She's nobody's sweetheart now/Painted lips, painted eyes/Wearing a bird of paradise"? Well, the university is a fallen--well--fallen person. [laughter] But I still think what it represents and what it still has much of is so critical to our society that at least I cannot join in with enthusiasm in the, you know, how should I say, in the--well, powerful criticism you make--and I recognize its power.

MR. BUCKLEY: Well, but there isn't such a movement, is there? [laughter]

MR. BLOOM: Oh, not except that you'd rather have the 2,000 names govern you instead of Harvard. [laughter]

MR. BUCKLEY: No, but there is no anti-intellectual movement that has any institutional base--

MR. BLOOM: Well, there's not an intellectual movement that has an institutional base either at the moment.

MS. DECTER: I think the assault on the universities cannot be called an anti-intellectual movement, and in fact it might, if there were such a movement, be called an intellectual movement.

MR. BUCKLEY: Well, the kind of thing he's doing--the kind of thing he's doing is hardly anti-intellectual--

MS. DECTER: Right.

MR. BUCKLEY: But it is a criticism of the culture of university learning, which is not anti-university any more than Newman was anti-university 100 years ago. Am I correct? But my point is that we don't want to encourage the notion that there is a vigilantism abroad that is threatening the independence of the University of Chicago.

MR. BLOOM: No, I certainly--

MR. BUCKLEY: As a matter of fact, you got hell also for saying that McCarthy hadn't damaged anybody's prospects with any university. Certainly where I was--

MR. BLOOM: In the major universities. In the major universities I think it had the positive effect of people coming together and saying, "We have something to defend, there's a barbarian at the gates." I mean, that's the way it appeared.

MR. BUCKLEY: Sure.

MR. BLOOM: Whereas in the '60s precisely the barbarian was within--

MR. BUCKLEY: Right.

MR. BLOOM: And, you know, wanted to be somebody we wanted to appeal to, and that we were much weaker on questions of academic freedom in the '60s than we were in the '50s. The major universities. I really didn't do a study. I'm not saying that it was otherwise elsewhere, but in my experience.

MR. BUCKLEY: Ms. Decter, you were suggesting--

MS. DECTER: I would like to return to the question, the implicit populism in Mr. Buckley's remark and relate it to the question of equalitarianism or--in the sense in which you use it, in the highest sense of the term. I certainly share Mr. Buckley's sentiments about whom I would choose to be governed by--I think most of us do--without necessarily university bashing. The qualities of reflection and attempting--and moderation and reason to which you speak, it seems to me, have been preserved in this country, in this society, over the last 20 years, far more by the ordinary folk of the populace than by those seeking to get an education and those seeking to educate them. But I would like to ask both of you: To what extent do you think that some of the difficulty that you describe--and particularly that is described in the end of your book, in which you give a very lucid and vivid rundown of the condition of the various disciplines in universities and their relation to one another--to what extent do we have to face the difficult fact that this may have something to do with the decision of this society that its equality extended to offering higher education to everybody?

MR. BLOOM: Would you like to?

MR. BUCKLEY: No. No, no, no, no. I'll defer to you. [laughter]

MR. BLOOM: The--

MR. BUCKLEY: I'm not funkling it, but-- [laughter]

MR. BLOOM: Well, these two things are related, as you can suppose, to a certain response to Ms. Decter's serious populism. I, for all that one loves the people, I have not seen the intellectual authority or tastes developing among the people. I think that the popular tastes have not been elevated in this period, and of course, if you have to transform what an education is in order to say that people are educated, of course, it's been self-defeating. But the interesting thing is, of course, the major universities have not had to make those compromises. The compromises came from a kind of--a different kind of decay. I mean, they can offer anything they want. Everybody knows there are enough good students who want to get into them, and they are free enough, they have plenty of time. So I don't think it follows from that. It may follow from the fact that there is only one standard present in the popular--well, the people. And a final word is, of course, I do think we are facing not merely social problems, but there is a fantastic intellectual problem about the relation of what one would call humanities to the sciences, which has a new and acute form which is part of the cause of all of this.

MR. BUCKLEY: Thank you, Professor Allan Bloom; thank you, Midge Decter; thank you, ladies and gentlemen from St. John's Prep. Mr. Bloom, author of The Closing of the American Mind.

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